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A Moving *Cabaret*

By Wilson Hutton

I have but one complaint about the Pennsylvania Centre Stage's production of *Cabaret*, which opened June 16, and I might as well get it out of the way right up front: they put it in the wrong theatre.

This sophisticated, multifaceted work is the diametric opposite of the last musical to grace the Playhouse stage, the big, splashy, choreography-centered *Good News*. It is not the kind of musical that plays well to the back of a large house; it was meant to be savored up close. In the Playhouse, the experience of *Cabaret* at the back of the house is markedly different from that at the front. (I know this because, at the preview I attended, I was able to view portions of the play from both vantages.) The choreography, particularly, suffers from distance—from the back rows, the stage looks too sparsely populated with only six or seven performers on it. The play's dramatic moments, more substantial than those in most musicals, are also better experienced at close range.

The Pavilion, with its more intimate arena configuration, would seem the logical choice for this material; there could even have been some cabaret-style seating on stage, similar to the current New York revival. (Here, William Schroder's clever and efficient set design includes cabaret tables around the perimeter of its stage-within-a-stage, populated by cutout silhouettes.) As the Pavilion was dark throughout the run of both *Cabaret* and its predecessor, *Art*, it's hard to fathom why this opportunity was missed.

That aside, it was a terrific show.

John Kander and Fred Ebb's musical, with book by Joe Masterhoff, is based on Christopher Isherwood's Berlin Stories (most notably his "Sally Bowles") and on a previous, straight-dramatic adaptation of Isherwood, John Van Druten's *I am a Camera*. (Kander and Ebb are also responsible for Broadway's edgy hits *Chicago* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman*.)

The story concerns two pair of lovers amid the threadbare decadence of Weimar Berlin, circa 1929. Sally Bowles is a free-spirited (and free-loving) British expatriate chanteuse who works in a seedy nightclub, and who impulsively moves in with American writer Cliff Bradshaw. Meanwhile, in a parallel plot that the Liza Minelli film version omitted, Cliff's unmarried fiftyish German landlady, Fraulein Schneider, considers a proposal of marriage from her aging beau, Herr Schultz—who happens to be Jewish. The play makes much of its characters' ironic unconcern about the rise of Nazism in their midst: "governments come and governments go," says Herr Schultz, trying to convince a frightened Fraulein Schneider that the burgeoning Nazi menace won't touch them. Schultz repeatedly, and poignantly, refers to himself as a "German," little knowing that his cherished German identity is only the first of many things he is doomed to lose at the hands of the Nazis. Only the "innocent" Cliff, who has actually read *Mein Kampf*, has any inkling of the horrors in store.

Director Dan Carter, who clearly knows how to get the most from his actors, has assembled a phenomenal cast for this well-staged production. Centre Stage veteran Melissa Hart, whose credits include playing Sally Bowles in the national tour, is an exquisite Fraulein Schneider. Her performance of "What Would You Do?" is a dramatic show-stopper. Brad Wallace gives a funny and touching performance as Herr Schultz. Both are seasoned professionals and their presence elevates the Schneider-Schultz story beyond mere subplot. Coco Medvitz, who has been a delight to watch throughout her recently-completed graduate schooling at Penn State, turns in another superlative performance as

Sally. Particularly good are her rendition of the title song and her closing reprise of "Lieber Herr."

I expected Medvitz to shine, but Penn State MFA candidate Brian Caplan's performance as Cliff was a revelation. Cliff, with his naiveté and his idealism, is in a sense the most difficult of these characters to play. It isn't easy to create a character who is essentially a prude in a nest of libertines and still make him plausibly attractive to a character like Sally. Caplan pulls it off with aplomb. His Cliff is a decent, stand-up guy with a boyish charm reminiscent of the young Jim Hutton in those romantic comedies from the sixties (though Caplan is the better actor).

Rounding out the principals, Ken Sonkin, hilarious last season in a multifarious, gender-bending turn in *Sylvia*, was a natural choice for the multifaceted, gender-bending role of the emcee, which Joel Grey originated on Broadway and later made famous in the movie. He's particularly good at portraying the comic menace of this character who embodies both the surface glitz of Weimar Germany and the creeping fascist rot underneath it.

Kate Watson Gelabert's choreography is apt: a little seedy, a little bawdy; performed with a slightly ragged edge that's just about right for the down-at-heels Kit Kat Klub. The principals all sing well, and occasionally brilliantly. And Richard Kennedy's tenor on "Tomorrow Belongs to Me" is breathtaking. However, as I have noted in previous Playhouse productions, the orchestra (a nice, tight ensemble under the direction of John Franceschina) sometimes drowns the performers' voices, even though all the singers are miked.

The production design (sets and costumes by Schroder, lighting by Scott Olinger) complements the staging beautifully. Schroder's set features an elevated "stage" which manages to suggest the nightclub, and every other location in the play, with a few simple furniture moves.

Cabaret runs through July 1 at the Playhouse. Next up at Centre Stage:
The Complete History of America (Abridged), July 7-15, at the Pavilion.

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